From: Jonathan Tepperman <JTepperman@cfr.org>
To: Jonathan Tepperman <teppermanj@gmail.com>
CC:
Date: Wed, 4/2/2014 7:53:13 PM
Subject: My interview with Paul Kagame

April 1, 2014
INTERVIEW

Rebooting Rwanda

A Conversation With Paul Kagame

Paul Kagame

On April 6, 1994, a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down by unidentified assailants. The next day, the killings began. Over the next three months, as the international community stood by, an estimated one million Rwandans—Tutsis and moderate Hutus—were systematically slaughtered by Hutu extremists, mostly using clubs and machetes. The genocide, one of history's worst and certainly its quickest, finally ended in July, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front seized control of the country. The rebel army was led by a 36-year-old Tutsi former refugee named Paul Kagame, who promptly took political control: serving first as the de facto leader of the country while defense minister and vice president and then, in 2000, assuming the presidency. During Kagame's two-decade rule, Rwanda has made spectacular progress. A country famously deemed "nonviable" in the mid-1990s has become one of Africa's best-run, most orderly, least corrupt, and safest states, with a booming economy (Rwanda's GDP has grown by an average of eight percent in recent years). But Rwanda's success has come with a darker side: opposition politicians have been jailed or killed under mysterious circumstances, journalists complain of harassment, and Kigali has been regularly criticized for meddling in neighboring Congo's long-running civil war. In late February, Kagame met with *Foreign Affairs* managing editor Jonathan Tepperman in Kigali to discuss these controversies, his tenure, Rwanda today, and the legacy of the mass killings two decades ago.

April 7 marks the 20th anniversary of Rwanda's genocide. The village *gacaca* courts finished work in 2012. The ICTR [International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda] expects to finish work this year. Tens of thousands of convicted criminals have been amnestied in the last two decades. Given all this, how far has Rwanda come in terms of reconciliation since 1994?

Well, it starts with understanding where we have come from and then seeing where we are today, and looking at the difference. We have come from a genocide and the devastation that characterized it. Almost the entire population was displaced. There was confusion, death, despair, and so on.

Today, you see people living side by side, walking together, developing the country. Institutions have been rebuilt. After total disintegration, the country is making progress, because the country has come back together. Rwanda has come back to life in many forms.

Reconciliation for me also means that people have had time to reflect. They have reflected on what divided them and what caused the genocide, and they have overcome some of the real or perceived differences that [allowed] the genocide to happen. It seems they are comfortable with themselves, with each other, and they are moving forward.

Does that mean that people have forgiven?

There is forgiving in a sense, but I don't think people have forgotten. They are willing to forgive for a purpose, the purpose being that they want a better future. People don't want to become hostages of history. So there is no doubt that forgiving has taken place. Those who lost people have settled back peacefully, back in their villages. It is not enforced, it is not monitored; it just happened.

Are people frustrated with the compromises inherent in the reconciliation process but willing to go ahead with them because they see them as the least bad alternative?

I think there has been an element of that, an element of realism. People are thinking about a better future, so they are able to put aside one thing and move on with another. That doesn't mean giving up on something. They say, "Yes, the past is there, we live with it. But we must not let it come at the expense of building a better future."

Countries that have gone through terrible civil wars have taken different approaches to reconciliation. Some emphasize peace and stability, some justice, some truth. What was Rwanda's approach?

Our approach was that all of these are very important. You can't do one at the expense of the other. Maybe a portion of one here and a bigger portion of the other there, but all of them have to happen at the same time. In fact, this is probably what has been most challenging for us: it hasn't been easy to prioritize, and almost everything had to be done at the same time.

Was it justice? Absolutely, justice had to take place. Reconciliation means you listen to justice and also move on, saying, "Well, this happened, but it is going to develop into something else."

After apartheid ended in South Africa, the new government's approach privileged truth; if people came forward and spoke honestly, they got amnesty. A version of that happened here: if people confessed and spoke honestly to the *gacaca* courts, they were given more lenient sentences. So was the emphasis here also more on truth and less on punishment?

One thing was not emphasized at the expense of the other. In the *gacaca* courts, justice was intertwined with reconciliation, almost in equal measure.

Some people were tried and sentenced. But the process also included being lenient on people who came out with the truth. The solution had to be more complicated than in South Africa, because our case was more complicated. The masterminds [of the genocide], the leaders, were tried, as were four categories of others who committed serious crimes. These people were not touched by *gacaca* courts; they went straight to the normal justice system. That had nothing to do with reconciliation.

Then, you had others tried through *gacaca* and given sentences commensurate to the level of their crime but also to the level of remorse they showed and the truth they told. People were actually let free, not because they were entirely innocent but because they were able to show that if they had had an

alternative, they would not have committed the crime, and because they asked for forgiveness and told the truth and showed remorse.

This was a fairly progressive approach. With all the bitter history involved, why didn't you choose a more punitive approach?

It is very simple. If one had come out of our struggle saying, "I'm going to impose my will and that's it, and whoever is on the other end must face the consequences," that would have sowed the seeds for a cycle of chaos. Therefore, we had to exercise maximum restraint and also reason. Was our duty settling scores or dealing with the issues in such a way as to allow space for building the future? Were we willing to be different from the people we fought, we replaced? This was always at the back of our mind.

Did some Tutsis want a more punitive approach?

Many people disagreed with me, no doubt. Even those who agreed that we needed to exercise restraint disagreed with the extent. They would say, "That's too much, you're forgiving too much." But the healthy thing about it was that it all came out, and there was always argument, there were always debates.

It would have been reasonable to imagine total chaos after the genocide, in terms of people on our side of the struggle taking over, finding their families killed, and taking it to those who were responsible and carrying out revenge, convinced that they were doing the right thing. "Our vision and leadership prevented that. It just didn't happen by accident. We wanted to allow ourselves time and space to put the country back to normal. People said, "We've stopped the genocide; we've been fighting for our rights and the truth." Now, the situation demands some kind of extraordinary approach, where you have to properly [balance] being idealistic and being realistic, because sometimes they come into collision. That was the complexity of the situation I had to deal with.

It seems that one of the ways you've tried to heal divisions is by trying to create a race-blind society, where talk of Hutus versus Tutsis is outlawed and ethnic identities are obscured. Was this necessary?

Reconciliation means something beyond, you know, someone did this to the other one and now they are talking to each other. It really means [thinking about] why would we even have done what we did? We are trying to bring back a nation that has been torn apart, so we're talking about [rebuilding] a nation, one that embodies Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas.

Suppression of these ethnic identities is not suppression in the usual sense, because we know each other and we want to express ourselves. We haven't told anybody not to express themselves or call themselves Hutus or Tutsis—no. What we have done and said is that calling yourself Hutu or Tutsi or Twa is fine, but there is a line you can't cross: if you harm the other that is different from you.

How does that work in practical terms? Can I go out and say, "I'm Hutu; I'm a proud Hutu?"

Yes.

So when do I cross the line?

If you say, "Because I'm a Hutu, I'm going to defend Hutus against the Tutsis," and you do things

against the Tutsis in the interest you call Hutu.

Let me give you another example, since this confuses people. I cannot say, "I want a political party of Tutsis, and the job of the party is to fight the Hutus." Because that is the same political thinking that destroyed our country. That isn't politics. In the United States or Europe, you can't say, "I'm going to form a party, and I am a black person, and I want only blacks to be in my party, and I am willing to fight whites because they're different from me."

Actually, you could. There's a distinction in American law between talking about violence in the abstract and then talking about it in specific terms.

We live with the wounds, even today. If we have banned parties, it is not because it was a party of Hutus—it was a party of extremist Hutus. And being a party of extremist Hutus means you are against Tutsis. You see what I mean? It also means they are against Tutsis to the extent that they think as they did in the genocide. One thing leads to another.

Why do so many Western journalists and human rights organizations say that you're using these laws as an excuse to get the opposition out of the way?

They have to explain why they believe that. The burden of proof is on their side, not mine. You can agree or disagree with me; that's your right. But if you say something, I should be able to ask you about it, and you should explain. The human rights groups operate from a position where if they say something, it must be taken as the truth. But if you are asking what they or journalists are saying, ask them.

Many experts also argue that Rwanda is not a reconciliation success story but a case of victor's justice and authoritarian rule. People see Rwanda in two completely different ways.

Yeah, that's true. That's why to be an independent observer, you should come to Rwanda, like you have, talk to people here, put together what you see, and make your own conclusion. That will give you a better truth than the truth told by experts. Some of these experts, a big percentage of them, have never even visited the place they are talking about. They've just gone to the library and read books. They've gone on the Internet and downloaded things, and they've become an expert. I have a problem with this. Have a conversation with real people here in Rwanda. They will express what they think. You can do it in public, in private, wherever. Out of that, you should be able to form an opinion.

There's something else I have to mention: expats want to see Rwanda in their own image. They think Rwandans must behave, think, espouse the same things they do. Anything different is wrong. And I feel like we need to challenge that. Who are these people who want to define us? This happens every day here. They find someone and say, "How do you feel? Are you free? Do you have the freedom to say what you want?" And the person may say, "Yeah, sure, I do. I have no problem." But they say, "No, no, no, you are not free. This Rwandan thinks he's free, but actually he's not." This is what we are up against.

A specific issue that critics point to is the fact that no Tutsis have been tried in the *gacaca* courts and that it's forbidden to even discuss whether crimes were committed by Tutsis during the civil war. Why not allow for a full accounting of crimes that were committed by both sides?

I don't know where that question is coming from. It could only come from people deciding to say what they want to say without connecting with the facts. But let me interpret it. We are talking about a genocide here. There are people who carried out the genocide, right? And you are talking about war; war and genocide are two different things.

So we separate them. The genocide was the Hutus killing the Tutsis.

At the beginning of the genocide, it was interesting to see the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, talking on the microphone, saying, "What is happening in Rwanda is just Hutus killing Tutsis and Tutsis killing Hutus, and this is the usual order of things." That was absolutely wrong. It was genocide, Hutus killing Tutsis. And it wasn't the first time—these groups started as early as 1959.

So we treated them differently. But we did not ignore crimes committed in the war. We have soldiers or fighters who were not only imprisoned but who are still in prison. We even have people who were shot and killed because they killed people.

I've heard that the number of Tutsis tried was only about 20.

Yes, but how many should have been tried? Is it 100? 500? 1,000? I ask you, how many did you want or did you expect? You can't just play with numbers and say, "No, it should have been something more than this." Based on what?

I will use one of the scenarios from the war to make my point. One time, when our forces were moving from the north, they fell into an ambush of a Rwandan army battalion of about 700. But they [the Rwandan army troops] had people with them, hiding weapons and food and so on, moving together, and others with bows and arrows. These were the people they had mobilized; some were actually militias. Our people fell on them. Among those who died, you could see some were soldiers. But some people want to say, "Your forces killed civilians." And as a matter of fact, without expanding the definition, these were civilians. Should I have had our commander or the forces that fought the civilians arrested?

There are international legal principles that can be used to sort out such cases, such as proportionality and targeted areas. It's not like you have to invent the law yourself.

No, but they're inventing it. This is what I'm talking about. And as for those 26, or if I use the figure of 20, if a unit was involved in killing people and we could trace it to the decision of the commander, we arrested the commander. So that's why the number was smaller. Even in trying cases of genocide, we had to categorize responsibility. Otherwise, we would have about two million people incarcerated. So we picked the leaders, mainly, and decided others would be cleared through the process of *gacaca* and allowed them to go back to their villages. I don't see how somebody can ignore all this and accuse us of victor's justice.

And by the way, after the war, some people committed revenge. And because they knew we would try them, they would kill themselves. Before we got to them, they shot themselves. That is proof that we did not condone this, and that we actually fought it. Why would somebody take his own life? Because they knew there was justice waiting for them.

After every mass killing in the twentieth century, the international community has promised "never again." Do you think the world is any better at preventing genocide today than it was 20 years ago? Did it learn any lessons from Rwanda?

I can give you a short answer: no.

Do you think another genocide is possible?

Not here, because we would prevent it. But it can happen somewhere else under this world's watch, yes.

Turning to the present, you've been president for 11 years now. Your government is all about evaluation and performance reviews. How do you evaluate your tenure? If you were a teacher, what grade would you give yourself?

You're always evaluated by others, not by yourself. But if I were to do so, I would try to be honest, as always. I would say, "With my knowledge of where we have come from, what we have done, what we have succeeded in doing, and at what rate, and what we haven't succeeded at … putting all of that together, I think we have made good progress."

Sometimes I ask myself, "In what ways could we have made the situation much better than it is today?" To be honest with you, maybe I have hit my limit. But I also think about it not in isolation but in relative terms. I look at many other countries, and I say, "We have done what humanly was possible to do."

You have three years left in your term. What are your remaining priorities?

My focus is not just about leaving. My focus has always been the progress we are making while I'm here: this country, how stable it is, what stage of prosperity we have achieved.

One broad area is Rwanda's institutions: Where are they in terms of capacity to deliver? What will they do in education, in health, for development and stability? Another area is fighting poverty and improving the standard of living.

We've done some decent work, given where we have come from and the challenges in between. But we are not yet where we need to be, looking at all the statistics. Building capacity is a work in progress.

Are you going to run again when your term is up in 2017?

If everybody said, "You know, we are tired of you; we can't wait until 2017," or, "You have made this mistake, and we want something else," you know what? I would leave that day. I'm trying to read the message correctly, even in 2014.

But what's going to happen in 2017?

Why do you have the need to know what will happen? I'm not bothered so much about that. What will happen will happen.

You've sometimes cited Singapore as a model for Rwanda, and it's easy to see why, given the similarities in fighting corruption, promoting order and cleanliness, etc. Does the model extend to politics as well? Lee Kuan Yew is perhaps the leading example of a benevolent strongman who was good for his people in some ways but didn't allow political openness. Is that the kind of leader Rwanda needs?

I have issues with some of the comparisons. Much as there might be similarities with Rwanda's approach or direction, they are not the same. We cannot be Singapore. We don't want to be anyone else. We want to be who we are.

I never see a conflict between political openness and social and economic development. Rather, I think the two are intertwined, even if you think one is lagging behind. The social and economic development indicators are very clear. But political openness, or whatever you call it, is subjective. Everybody has a right to define it the way they want, because there isn't tangible specific data to base it on.

Can you give me concrete examples of how Rwanda is making progress in terms of political openness?

What does it mean, "political openness"?

Are you asking me?

Yes. [Laughter.] That will give me a better answer.

Well, it means having a free press that's able to function without fear of government reprisal. It means the freedom to register political parties based on ideology and to hold contested elections where parties can compete on an even footing. And it means the freedom for individuals to speak freely and openly, without fear of repercussions, except maybe in extreme cases. In the United States, for example, you can say terrible things, but it's still legal.

Different countries have different standards. When we hold journalists accountable, we are criticized for it. I will give you an example. There was a Western journalist who operated here. When he went to the United States, he was found with drugs and was arrested. He was probably using drugs here as well. But if we had arrested him here, can you imagine the reaction?

[As for political openness,] my own standards are no different from other standards. As you rightfully raised, there are certain occasions in the West when journalists are restricted. But if you come to this country and look at how political power operates, it is the people that decide the priorities. And they voice whatever they want to voice and elect their leaders.

Can you point to specific recent legal or regulatory changes that have created new liberties?

Well, they don't have to happen every year. But, for example, if you look at the media space, if anybody does anything wrong, before the government steps in and holds them accountable, the media themselves can do so. That is recent. And when you talk about registering political parties without problem, I think the standards are also very high.

But this is another area of double standards. Even highly developed countries with the freedom to register political parties still have few political parties, right?

When you win a presidential vote by 90 percent [Kagame received 95 percent of the vote in 2003 and 93 percent in 2010], that gives the impression that the election was not truly contested.

Gives the impression to whom? I find it absolutely absurd that people would say, without looking at the context, that in the case of Rwanda, having a victory this size is bad. Twenty years ago, we started from scratch. Rwandans came from a genocide and had nothing, had to think about the immediate survival of their family. Then, you have an election. And they see a party like mine, which is credited with the

survival of the country. And let's say there is a competing party that is run by maybe a student who has blood on his hands. And our party has a machine because it has been in existence for some time and is responsible for saving this country. And after the election, people say, "You know what? This student should have won 30 percent of the vote." Honestly, this is something I just can't understand.

Is voting here voluntary?

It is in broad daylight, so you can see it is voluntary. You can't police five million people without that being visible. You can't force them to do something—it will backfire on you. We say voting booths should open by 7 AM and they should close by 6 PM, but so many people are there that you know the results by midday. Observers come and see, and not even those who wish ill of our government have ever said anybody was forced.

You see, people get identified with something. They have identified me with the struggle. If that is a crime, I plead guilty. I can't run away from it.

Economic growth is critical to Rwanda's success, both in material terms and in terms of reconciliation. Your progress has been dramatic in recent years, with over one million people lifted out of poverty since 2006, your first international bond issue in April, etc. Your government has talked about Rwanda becoming a middle-income country by 2020, which is a very ambitious goal.

Which is achievable.

But the obstacles are enormous. Around 50 percent of the country remains in poverty, 90 percent or so depends on subsistence farming. Your main exports are coffee and tea—commodities that are notoriously fickle. And in January, the World Bank lowered your growth forecast from your recent eight percent average to 7.2 percent. Has something gone wrong in the last year? And what are your plans to diversify your economy so you can keep growing?

We have done a lot of diversifying. It's construction, it's IT, it's mining—those are the fastest-growing areas. And if you look at the levels of investments in infrastructure, like fiber-optic cable, and how we continue to extend it to rural areas, and how roads are also being improved—that's what keeps feeding industry. And 7.2 percent is only low compared to eight percent. And there is no way the rest of the world doesn't affect us. Being ambitious, proudly so—there's nothing wrong with that. The key is continued investment in building our people's capacity.

Does that mean education?

Education, yes, but beyond that, skills. Education is general. But we are also targeting skills that fit the market, not only here but outside. Even in agriculture, which is limited by the size of our land, we can maximize our potential. We are now feeding the region. The one million people lifted out of poverty in five years—it was because of the effort we put into agriculture.

But you can't get to the next stage of development with agriculture.

That's why we keep developing the skills of our people, investing in education and infrastructure, like broadband and roads and transport and communication facilities. And investing in high-value production.

You mean manufacturing?

Yes, some areas of manufacturing, but not only. You talked about coffee, tea, and so on. Initially, coffee and tea were bulk kinds of things taken to the border, but now, you can process them here. Then there is tourism, which is growing very fast. All that, plus good governance, will continue to give us stable growth. And we have also invested in making sure that [regional] integration works. It allows East Africans to come to do business here and for us to go and do business there. There are continued challenges, but the opportunities are greater.

You've been very vocal over the years in condemning the impact of foreign aid on developing countries. You've called it a scourge. But foreign aid still represents something like 40 percent of the budget of Rwanda. What are you doing to lower that number?

With our continued growth, our GDP has more than doubled every seven to ten years. That has had a huge impact. When we started, foreign aid represented about 80 percent of our national budget. Now, it is down to 42 percent, and we keep bringing it down.

It's not about condemning aid as such. I've also talked about how beneficial aid can be. But it is like taking medicine. They sometimes tell you that taking this medicine can cure a diseases, but they put on the side [of the bottle] a warning of the side effects. This is how it is with aid. It is supposed to cure certain diseases, but you have to beware of the side effects. Aid creates dependence.

But people misquote me and say that I have abused the people who give aid, that I have said I don't want or need aid. I have never said that. The key is using it to wean yourself off aid.

You mean using it to invest rather than just to buy food and things like that?

Yes. And it is important that aid get invested with us in an agreed-upon manner, mainly through the budget system, so we're able to see what has come in and what it has done, rather than giving aid through some underground route or groups. Otherwise, you don't know what has come of the tens of millions of dollars your country has received. Aid does not preclude transparency and accountability. But people teach us democracy, and then they want us to do things in a very obscure way with them. We want to follow best practices. We are not happy with 7.2 percent growth. That is how ambitious we are.

Congo is the source of many of Rwanda's problems. What's your assessment of Congo today and President Joseph Kabila's leadership?

Well, as I have said many times, I hate being asked Congo questions, because sometimes people make it appear that I'm the manager of Congo, or that I control what happens or doesn't happen in Congo, which is false.

And of course, the response by the international community to Congo's problems has been filled with huge mistakes. They treat eastern Congo as if it is a country on its own. So they concentrate all of the energy there, but the immediate problems continue to be in the Congo as a whole—a point that has been missed in the West. The best way to deal with Congo is to deal with the entirety of Congo, which

means you have to look at how Congo is governed. The leaders. The institutions. How are they being held accountable? Why do people come to ask Rwanda about Congo?

Because Rwanda has a capable government. If you ask it for something, it can do it. It can be effective. If you ask the Congolese government, it may say yes, but it tends not to do much.

Yes, but does that make Congo's problems my responsibility? Are they hiring me to go and manage Congo? No. Yet they blame Rwanda for Congo.

Speaking of blaming Rwanda, you have steadfastly denied supporting Congolese militias as proxy or buffer forces to prevent attacks on Rwanda from across the border. Yet the UN, the United States, the Europeans, and former members of the M23 militia have all claimed that Rwanda supported the group. Are all these claims wrong?

They are wrong in a very major way. First of all, there is absolute hypocrisy in what they say. I mean, are they addressing Congo's problems, and if so, how? By continuing attacks on Rwanda?

Second, why are they selective on what problems they deal with and how they deal with them? Has any one of those governments denied that there are still *génocidaires* in the Congo? They have been there for 20 years. My question has always been, what is the West doing about them?

Third, why do you keep saying that Rwanda is the problem in the Congo and not that Congo is a problem for Rwanda?

When they accused us of supporting M23, we said, let's talk about first things first. Tell us first of all about this M23. What is it? Where did it come from? Where did it originate? What are the problems that gave rise to the existence of M23? Before you even start accusing us, let's talk about these things. The origin of M23 is Congo and its mismanagement of its affairs.

But that doesn't answer the question of whether Rwanda was cooperating with M23.

No, but we answered that long ago. It wasn't.

And yet it would make sense if Rwanda were involved militarily in eastern Congo, because Congo is a disaster. The east of the country has no law. The Congolese army is not capable of policing the state. Hutu*génocidaires* may still roam freely in the region. So it would be logical for you to be there.

Yes, it is very logical. But we are not, because we were told not to be there.

Now, people are saying the reason M23 shut down is because President Obama called you and said, "Stop supporting the group," and you agreed to do so.

Fine. Let me say we did that. Have the problems of eastern Congo ended? So this whole thing of blame Rwanda for everything just doesn't work. That's what proves it is just an escape route, a hoax.

Do you have any faith now in the newly enhanced UN peacekeeping force or U.S. envoy Russ Feingold's peacekeeping mission?

The only thing I can say is, I wish them success. But as they say, the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. Just wait for the eating, and then we will know. We've been exhausted with these things. But at the end of the day, all of us want to solve the problem.

But we are stuck with a problem. Say Obama called me, said, “Shut down M23.” I did. Fine. If all of that is true, what is the problem now? Why are we having problems in eastern Congo? Why are we having problems in Katanga, in the south? Why are you having problems in other regions?

This world is just ridiculous, honestly. It is. I’m sitting back after being bruised by all the bashing we have had.

Last question: On the anniversary of a terrible event 20 years ago that changed history, what message would you most like to convey to the world?

First of all, the world has done a huge disservice to Rwandans and the memory of those who died by thinking that the genocide was just an event that had no aftermath. The world does not think of the genocide’s real meaning, that this is something that left us with an aftermath that you have to deal with on a daily basis. That probably will go on for decades.

The genocide happened. Some members of the international community were involved with its happening and also the failure to prevent it or stop it. And they have failed to help manage the aftermath.

So we as Rwandans have had to deal with this tragic history of ours. We have had no alternative but to confront it, and we will. We have never sought to blame anyone else for it. Even if there are so many responsible, we don’t want to blame anybody for it. We take full responsibility for ourselves.

But I wish people did not add to the burden by blaming us for everything else, which has nothing to do with us.

Editor's Note: This Interview has been edited and condensed.

Copyright © 2002-2012 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.
All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a Permissions Request Form. If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit Copyright Clearance Center to clear permission.

Return to Article: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/interviews/rebooting-rwanda

Jonathan Tepperman
Managing Editor
Foreign Affairs
58 East 68th St, NY NY 10065
tel: +1.212.434.9696

Assistant: Christine Clark
email: cclark@cfr.org
tel: +1.212.434.9507